

Fine Art, Folk Art and Web 2.0

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Abstract

The following text is an interview between me and two members of staff at Writtle School of Design, the artist Michael Szpakowski and the curator and critic Pryle Behrman. In this interview I discuss work I have made over the last five years. I draw links between my early and later work, and discuss themes throughout my work, such as social networking, online communication and creating physical art works inspired and influenced by online practice. I draw links between fine art and online social practice, as well as discuss links between my work and artists such as Sophie Calle, Nan Goldin and Ed Rucsha.

Early work

MS/PB

Alright, we would like to ask you to talk about the development of your own practice, going quite far back. You might want to do this piece by piece, or certainly memorable or milestone-piece by piece. I remember when you first came to Writtle and you made that tape concoction and I remember being quite mystified by it. I was unsure whether you were actually going to be a really great artist, or somebody who was going to be a complete nightmare. For about a month I was puzzled by this. I wonder if you could start talking through your work, start with that piece and come up to where your work is at the moment, just talk about each of those projects and how you made decisions about what you were going to develop and things that influenced you.

LS:

Okay, trying to think back that far, so the tape piece, I think it was called *Your Music Sucks Anyway* (2009). It was a response to the proposed law to cut people off from the internet if they were caught downloading music illegally (*Drury, 2009*) and it was about the time a lot of peer to peer music sharing sites such as Pirate Bay and Limewire were making the news at the time. (*Kiss, 2009*)

So it was a response to that, so I suppose even back at the very start of my degree I was interested on what was going on the internet, in terms of how people where using the internet to interact, and about sharing and openness on the internet. It occurred to me that before the internet that people had found ways to copy and share music, and the ways people will do this will evolve and change with technology and laws, but it will never stop. Looking back I think for me it was also the realisation that despite all the sci-fi movie hype, technology can only change people so much.



Figure 1. Liz Sterry, Your Music Sucks Anyway, 2009.

At the time I had been looking at work by *Tara Donovan* who was making installations out of everyday objects such as polystyrene cups. (Smith, 2003)

I remembered how I used to record music off the radio using cassette tapes, I think for a lot of people they hold a lot of nostalgia. So I wanted to use tapes as they reminded me that there were other ways to sharing music before the internet.



Figure 2. Tara Donovan, Untitled, 2003, Styrofoam Cups, Hot Glue. Ace Gallery New York.

So I took these out of date things - tapes we used to record stuff off the radio and swap, and I made an evolving mess of magnet tape and suspended it from the ceiling. I think because I thought 'That's what music will do, we will find another way to share music, they can keep putting laws on it but people always find ways to share things that interest and excite us like music and art.'

It was an interest in online activity made into a physical installation, in that way it is similar to my later works such as Kay's Blog.

I remember saying at the time that if I were to developed it I would have liked to have made it even bigger, perhaps taking up a whole room, with more 'hives' hanging from the ceiling

MS/PB:

I remember talking to you about having parts of the piece that you were making that actually played music or produced music, and you were very resistant to that, and I remember the eventual piece was this kind of sculptural piece made out of cassette tapes.

LS:

It did have a moving part, made from a deconstructed Walkman that hung down from the middle, which made a whirring sound, so there was nothing to play and no recording. To me it reflected the way laws were trying to silence music on the internet at the time, but the motion of playing music carried on as people will find ways to share music and files.

I had also been looking at Nam June Paik - Random Access Music (1963) (Leonardo, 2002) and during my development for this project I had created boxes out of deconstructed walkmans and cassette tapes that you could pull the magnetic tape from and play through the walkman part.

MS/PB:

So this sort of collaborative side of it always interested you; the sharing, the network side of it was always very important to what you did?

LS:

Yeah. I think there is something interesting about the way the internet connects people and allows for collaboration and sharing of information.

I think what happened with Twitter in Egypt in 2011, how although the government had tried to block the internet people were finding ways to use twitter shows the impact that this kind of sharing can have (BBC News, 2011)

I had also been looking at things that shared information offline, like the Dead Drops project . (Dead Drops, 2010)

MS/PB

Okay, so take us on from there to the next work that you think is of significance for you

LS

The next piece I can remember was the short film called *Borders* where I hung an empty frame from various places in Hylands Park in Chelmsford and using a small handheld video camera, filmed views around the frame by walking around with it, allowing for a very handheld motion of filming. The idea evolved from the notion of 'looking and seeing' .

I was thinking about how the frame focuses and tells us where to look, and then the ideas of the art being in the frame or outside the frame, and if you take the frame out of the art work and just have it as it is.



Figure 3. Liz Sterry, *Still from Borders* 2010

MS/PB

Were there any particular artists that you looked at that inspired you or you thought well actually, I could do that a bit better than they did?

LS

Looking on the internet at the time there were quite a lot of people doing this with still images and frames, particularly I found a lot of 'hobby' photography of people using frames as props with models posed climbing through the frame or holding it to their face.

MS/PB

The fact that the idea that the frame is actually really important has seeped so far into popular culture is very interesting.

Once again you draw on these popular cultural tropes, but the actual piece is extraordinarily beautiful and lyrical, it's a really enchanting bit of video, when you see these frames in these trees in this wintry landscape, there is a dog in there as well, it's very... Tarkovsky-ish. It went on to be shown in quite a few places, didn't it?

LS

It toured with a DVblog showreel project and was shown at Givon Art Gallery in Tel Aviv, Tether Gallery in Nottingham, the Electronic Village Galleries project in Cornwall, and Just Buffalo Literary Center in Buffalo, New York.

Kay's Blog

MS/PB

OK let's talk through the next piece of work that you feel was significant for you.

LS

The next one that I remember after that was 'Kay's Blog'

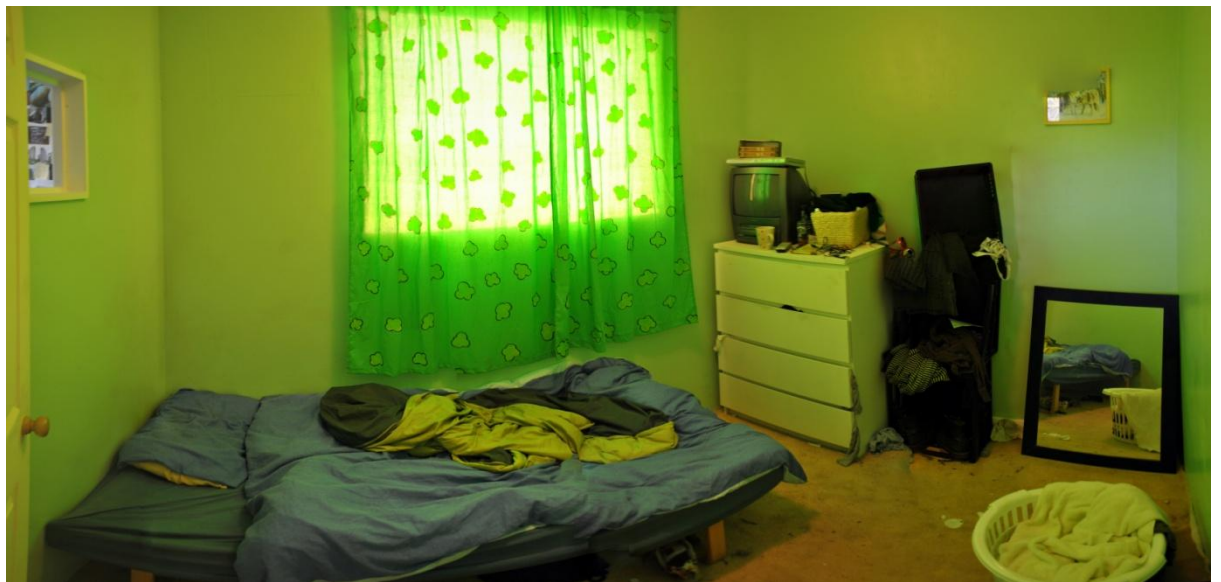


Figure 4. Liz Sterry, Kay's Blog at Furtherfield Gallery, Finsbury Park London, 2012

MS/PB

How did that come about?

LS

I had recently set up a Tumblr blog and was interacting on there the way in which the site

encourages users to do so. Tumblr at the time was different to other blogging sites- it felt it was closer to Twitter in ideas than a blog site. Tumblr blogs have a user dashboard like Twitter, where users can see what the people they watch are posting and talking about. All posts also have a 'reblog' button so posts by others that are of interest can be posted to another user's blog easily. (Marquart, 2010)

It's interesting that Facebook brought in the 'share' feature to their site after Tumblr became popular. (Ray, 2013) Kay wasn't particularly different from anyone else using a personal tumblr blog, she was just someone I was watching, there were a lot of people like her.

I had also been looking at Sophie Calle's work, particularly *Suite Vénitienne* (*BlackFlash Magazine*, 2012) and *The Hotel, Room*. (tate.org.uk 2014) I was watching people from my computer at home in England, and seeing people like Kay who were just inviting you into their lives and personal spaces, and all you have to do is click on a button that says 'follow' and you are following the things they post on their blogs, you don't have to sneak around or work as a chamber maid in a hotel like Calle did to gain these personal insights into other people's lives and personal spaces.



Figure 5. Sophie Calle, *The Hotel, Room 44*, 1981

It's odd, because it could be really sinister, but it's not, because its socially acceptable on the internet to do these things. You can jokingly say you are cyber -stalking someone. So all of that, coupled with being introduced to Calle's work, it kind of met at the same point. I went through a few different

ideas about it first, I went through ideas of maybe just trying to replicate blog users' pictures by building a background to mimic the background in their blog photos and photographing myself in that space, but I don't think it would have had the same impact on viewers.

Then I thought if I am going to build the background, I might as well build her whole room, so I went all out on building the whole room, and I think it was suggested to me to try and make a smaller scale model, or make it out of something more accessible, like cardboard, but I didn't want to do that, I wanted to actually make you feel like you were standing in the room, everything from the look to the way the room smelled, buying the same beer as Kay drank and letting my dog lay on the carpet and bed in the room I built as I knew Kay's dog often spent time in her room. I felt that these bloggers like Kay were inviting viewers into their personal spaces and I wanted to know how it felt physically to be in that personal space and if it would feel different from the digitally having a view into their personal space.

MS/PB

Did you tell her what you were doing?

LS

Right at the beginning when I was thinking about doing this on Tumblr, I put out a message saying would anyone mind me using them for my art project, and a few people got in touch and said "Well, it depends" and some people said "Yeah, sure do what every you like" and she was one of the people that said "Yeah, sure, whatever" and then we had no contact at all until the room was built for the show at Writtle College when I contacted her again and said I have made an art project which is a copy of your bedroom, and she was a bit worried about people taking the mickey out of her, and I had to explain that it wasn't and then she

said “Oh, fine” and we have never had any contact since.



Figure 6. Liz Sterry, Kay's Blog at The O2 Centre London, Part of Digital Zoo UK Tour 2014 with Furtherfield Gallery

MS/PB

Was there any sense of why she thought that?, Teenage paranoia or some sort of stereotype about artists just doing stuff for a laugh, and not really taking it very seriously?

LS

I assumed it was because the idea is that we are all told not to put too much information on the internet, and then she felt maybe I was picking her out because she was an individual and laughing and saying “Look at what this person is doing, they are doing everything they have been told not to do”, and I thought maybe she thought I was taking the mickey out of her. I had spoken to a few people who felt it was about internet privacy, but I don’t think of it like that, it’s not a safety instruction, it’s a piece of artwork, it’s not about education. I just wanted to explore how we feel differently viewing someone’s personal space on the internet.

MS/PB

I remember you said, I think you showed me part of her response, and one of the things was “Tell me you didn’t use the naked pictures!”

LS

There seems to be to be this culture within Tumblr. I’ve heard users say “Don’t talk about Tumblr outside of Tumblr”. It’s easy to forget that it is a publicly accessible site. You can sign up fairly anonymously - all you need is an email address. But you don’t have to be a member of Tumblr to see anything that is on there. On Tumblr it is easy to follow blogs of people with the same interests and stance on political issues, like being body positive and stuff going on in there, so people were showing their bodies a lot, because they are part of this movement that is linked to Tumblr (Naomi Greenaway, 2014) , and because they feel they are on a contained space on Tumblr, they feel more confident doing it, and because they are only following and being followed by the people that are interested and on the same wavelengths, I think they forget the rest of the world isn’t always in that bubble.

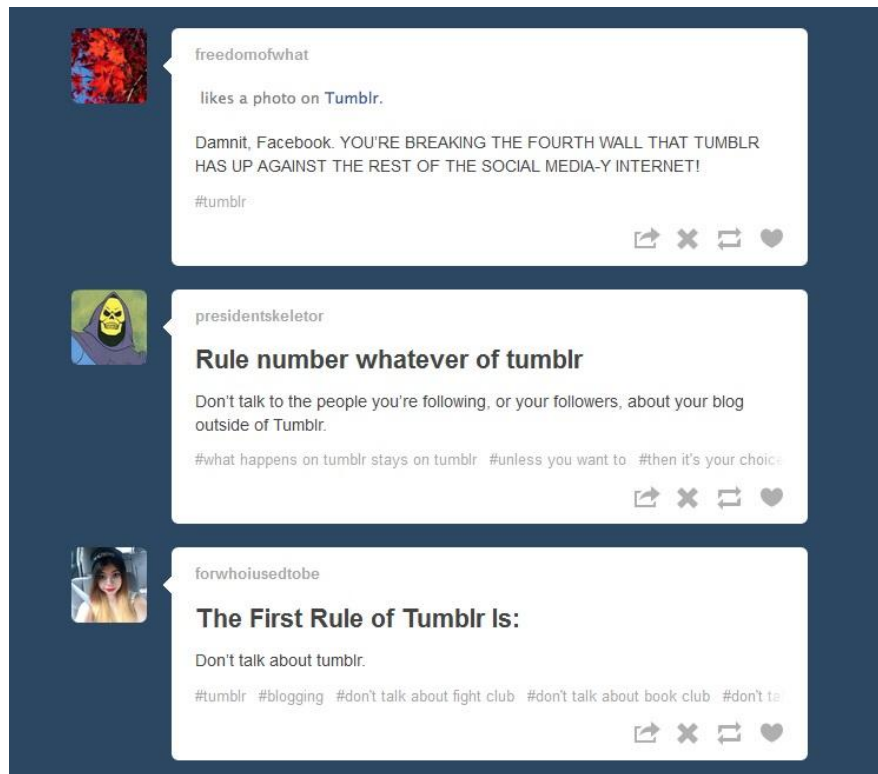


Figure 7. Screen grab from Tumblr.com 2014

MS/PB

It's a very powerful piece which has clearly had an effect on a lot of people, because it's been shown a number of times, at Furtherfield Gallery in Finsbury Park, and now it's been on tour with Furtherfield's Digital Zoo tour of shopping centres.

I believe it is going to be shown at the Hayward Gallery later on this year so big congratulations for that. What also interests me about the piece, is that although it is this rebuilding of a particular place there are also within it some bits that don't necessarily fit like the drawings, the versions that you did of the...I think they were originally photographs...which you then drew.

LS

Yep.

MS/PB

Was that because they appeared in her room? if not how did that come about and do you still show those as part of the piece?

LS

The sketch book has been shown alongside the Writtle and Furtherfield shows but not with the tour. We still show all the photos that I collected and the notes on her that I collected, and the screen shot of Google street view from outside her apartment building.

I originally kept a sketch book just on her, and it started off as a sketch book to collect information about her. I wrote down a list of her contacts on social network sites, and found out which ones had the same last name as her, which schools they had been to etc.. It started off like that, then I started making sketches of her from her photos that she was putting on the blog. It was just a part of that idea of obsessive following and although it was nothing that wasn't on the internet but when you move it from the internet to a sketch book it fits our ideas of 'creepy stalker' behavior.

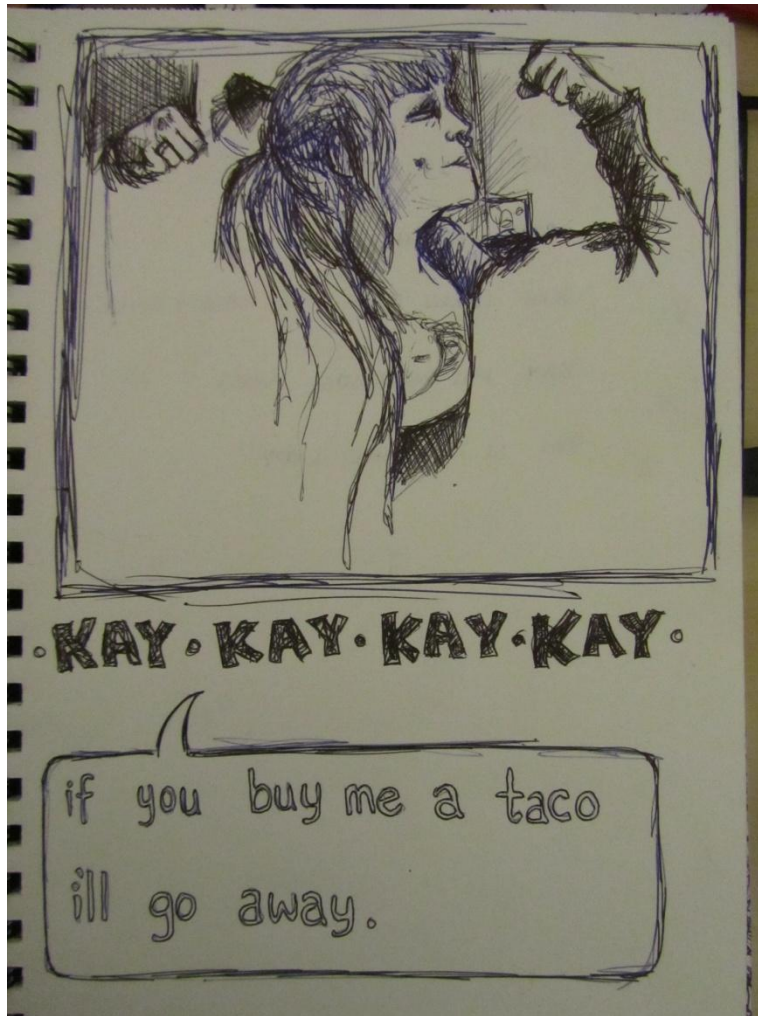


Figure 8. Liz Sterry, Page from Sketch book on Kay's Blog 2011

MS/PB

It was interesting how Kay was a bit freaked out by all this but there wasn't any noticeable change to her actual behaviour online, what she put out there ...

LS

That's right. She carried on with the blog. I think a year later or so she changed her blog, or changed her name on the blog, but it was still the same thing. Recently when the piece went on tour again I looked her up and she hasn't changed the way she uses the internet, I still know what her bedroom

looks from her social media accounts. Why should she change, she is not any different from many people her age who are using the internet, I myself take selfies and share photos from my surroundings that I share on the internet.

MS/PB

That's interesting how, someone who has been, for want of a better word, has been slightly burned by the experience of being open online, and still hasn't changed anything about her. It seems to say something interesting psychologically, but I'm not quite certain what it is now, the sort of naturally trusting nature of human nature or the kind of the comfort and protection you feel amongst a group of peers, a safe group, even though in many ways they are not because it is all out there...

LS

I don't think there is anything wrong with showing people your bedroom or personal space, in that context.

MS/PB

I remember you talking about the influence of Nan Goldin?



Figure 9. Nan Goldin, Nan and Brian in Bed, New York City 1983

LS

Yeah. I suppose because she was showing a lot of very personal, very intimate moments in her life. (Ruddy, 2009) Now with social media and selfies I wonder if people aren't as drawn to this kind of artist so much anymore, because people are documenting their own personal lives and intimate moments on publicly accessible web spaces. This kind of voyeurism is normal.

MS/PB

It's fascinating, the way in which you so clearly understand the network and how that positions you to use the network. I think you are absolutely right not to say it's not about internet safety, although

it is alarming, for example, that you managed to find Kay's address! What struck me from the very beginning and a couple of times after I had seen the piece, is just how beautiful it is, just how strange it is, that sensation of walking into a simulacrum of somebody's room from thousands of miles away that you carefully built. There is something deeply poetic about this. Of course it does stand as a kind of warning about how much you put out there, but at the same time it is about all those kind of interesting practices.

*What about the fact that it is now receding back into time, because it is now a piece not about how it **is** but how it **was**. Are you changing how you feel about the piece in any way because of that?*

LS

Yeah, I have had a think about it, it is quite interesting about how it is not relevant to how her life is now, but I suppose that is how the internet is, there has been a great deal of news recently about people are trying to erase their history on the internet (Wakefield, 2014) So, that is an interesting part of the internet and social media, you can freeze a moment in time and it will be there on Google, and if you put it on Facebook five years ago and didn't delete it, it will still be on Facebook.

Two installations

MS/PB

I think it would be useful now if we move on because I think quite unusually for a student here, somebody who is at the end of an MA, you are showing professionally. Talking about looking back in time, I look back in time at the work you made in the first year here, and it's almost – I'm not saying you didn't learn anything from being here and having dialogue with staff and with other students – but I feel that you came here in a lot of ways fully formed, that you came here as a thinking artist who made interesting art and that is why for me it is worth tracing the steps of talking about the whole way that you developed as an artist over this period, because each piece has such a sort of strong sense of being by you and it is clear that your preoccupations actually have been fairly constant throughout as well, they have just emerged in the work in different ways. So after Kay's Blog, tell us the next important piece of work that you produced.

LS

I did the piece for my graduation show. I can't remember what I called it. I built a whole box like room, and in that room I did, I suppose, various kinds of performances where I was dressing up as different characters, making photographic self-portraits, and then putting these on the wall in a kind of grid that could be moved by the spectator. The photos hung on pegs and there was a photo on each side so people could pick them up and swap them around...



Figure 10. Liz Sterry, Self Portrait Installation, Writtle College, 2012

MS/PB

Could you just tell us a bit more about those? You have touched on all these different things, like the fact that there was this recursive thing going on as well as the possibility of audience interaction.

LS

I thought about that one for a while. I think the recording myself in lots of different ways in these different self-portraits came about after *Kay's Blog*, and I remember *Wired* asking me what I was doing next and I said about the self-portraits, and she said "Oh, that's different" and to me it didn't seem different at all because I had been seeing Kay taking all these self-portraits, and I had been watching that for a long time, and technology at the moment is very much inviting us to do that, you know, laptop cameras and phone cameras all have a button that you can press that points directly at you and takes your image. The other thing was you can't get away from being on the internet - if you

were there five years ago, it's still there to look up. I started making all these different versions of myself and putting them on the internet, I think I have got a couple of fake Facebook accounts, not for interacting or anything really, but just so they exist... and so one of those is one of these characters that I recorded in the box with these self-portraits... the idea of being all in the box, of being in the same place is because even on the internet when you are interacting from different places, it's still very much... it's that bubble again that you put yourself in when you are on the internet...

MS/PB

Just before we leave this, I would still like to know about this recursive thing, where you took photos of yourself, you put them up and then you re-photographed them and so on. I remember at one point there was a broken chair in the box and I said "That's really great you ought to photograph that" then the next week I came along and there was a photograph of a broken chair up on the wall. I don't know whether you're aware of it but recursion - the idea of stuff nested inside other stuff is very much part of a computer programming so it's interesting that as someone who is so deeply involved in the internet you're "mirroring" that in your work.

LS

I suppose again going back to the Tumblr blogs, where somebody puts a photo on it and you like it, you just press the re-blog button, then you get these little notes underneath it showing how many people have re-blogged them, and people love that, they put a photo up and it has got 20 re-blogs and there are some images which have got thousands and thousands and then someone grabs the

same photo tweaks the colour, turns it to black and white, puts it back on and they in turn get thousands of re-blogs, because it's a good or interesting image, and so on...

MS/PB

So it was a physical, gallery-based analogy to some of the kinds of remix and the appropriation practices that are so much part of the internet. The other thing was this possibility of the viewer actually being able to physically reconfigure the photos in the display... can you just explain just how that was done?

LS

I had - it was like a - grid of nails, and then the photo were on those little bulldog clips, with one photo on the front and one on the back, and people could pick them up and swap them round or turn them over. Again I suppose I was influenced by the practices of re-use and change and re-positioning typical of Tumblr - it was a physical re-enactment of that. Different people could come in, they just move your artwork about and change things.

MS/PB

Let's move on to the next piece. I'm not sure whether there is work between the installation with the bulldog clips and the Star Wars installation in that same space a year later that you wanted to talk about?

LS

Nothing that is springing to mind.

MS/PB

You were clearly very active, because I remember throughout that whole period I was looking on things like Flickr and I was seeing people raving about work by you, all sorts of different material, some of it performative, some of it was modelling work, some of it was different photographic techniques, but I suppose it all led up really to the piece that you made for your MA exhibition, so maybe we could talk about that now.

LS

So that was the three different sets of work that were shown together because I think they were a process, well, they felt like that to me. They felt quite clearly like a sort of journey, steps from being completely internet inspired and related pieces of work and to more gallery or physical work, and I suppose I was thinking again about Nan Goldin and how there were a lot of photos just as beautiful and intimate as Nan Goldin's work that are just snapshots by people who were using Tumblr and Instagram to document parts of their life... And also whether we need to put artwork in an artwork box to make it beautiful and relevant .So to start off with, the *Drinking Alone with the Internet* pieces would be intimate. It would be a night where I would generally have the house to myself, and I would dress up as a Star Wars character and have a few drinks and press the record button for a photo. I was using the Pixlr-o-matic application which is just a free, simple, online, photo editing tool.



Figure 11. Liz Sterry, *Drinking Alone With The Internet, Drinking Port as Boba Fett*, 2013

MS/PB

So all these images did you actually choose to share them afterwards?

LS

Yeah, yeah, they have been.

MS/PB

What sort of response did you get?

LS

I got a fair amount of likes and stuff on Facebook. I think depending on where you share them it was slightly different. Tumblr, not a great deal of response. Someone on Facebook actually did the same, you know, they saw me drinking with a Star Wars Clone Trooper helmet one and they put their Star

Wars helmet on and... then had a drink, and shared the photo on facebook, so that was very sort of conversational in the sense of the way you do something and someone else does it slightly differently.

MS/PB

I suppose you chose Star Wars because of the mass appeal, as it were.

LS

Yeah, because even if you are not a fan and you don't connect with it, you will recognise it, but there are various forums and websites all set up to people who love Star Wars, there are various Tumblr accounts that are just about Star Wars, and Facebook pages too, so it's really relevant on the internet . People who do love Star Wars, the minute they see something Star Wars there is an instant connection which is that particular sort of connection you get with a complete stranger over the internet. It's interesting - you wouldn't have so many opportunities to do that if it wasn't for the internet. I wouldn't be quite as likely to go out in town.... I suppose you do get it in a way, if you see somebody wearing a T-shirt you like, people will go "Hey" but I think the internet makes a lot more room for those connections with strangers.

MS/PB

And the biggest paradox being how alone you are physically, and how connected you are to millions and millions of people.

LS

Yeah, I mean there are all sort of ideas about drinking alone and drinking socially and one is taboo and one is fine. So you're drinking alone but you're not because you are on the internet and you could be talking to somebody, but you are still physically drinking alone. I remember speaking to my Dad and he was talking about my younger brother and he said, it was New Years Eve, and he said

“Aren’t you going out? Be with the rest of your friends” and my brother said “Oh, they are here”, he was chatting to all his friends on the computer, he wasn’t going out, he was just having a few beers with his mates and they were all together. He was quite a bit younger than me, so maybe there is something new happening there, where people don’t need to go out to socialise.



Figure 12. Liz Sterry, *Drinking Alone With The Internet, Drink Rum as an Ewok*, 2013

MS/PB

Can you talk about the other pieces in the MA show and both how they relate to the first piece, but also what you are doing in them that is different?

LS

So the next piece which moves a little bit away from the internet, a bit more towards the gallery ideas, is the *100 Drunken Fetts* which was just a snapshot selfie taken on my phone at arms-length - I have got a Boba Fett helmet on and am holding a beer up. I ran the image through this online editing tool, and there is a random button that you can press and it will pick up three different things: a border, a filter and an effect, and it will add those randomly for you. I did that 100 times, then I chose 60 of them and showed them in a grid.

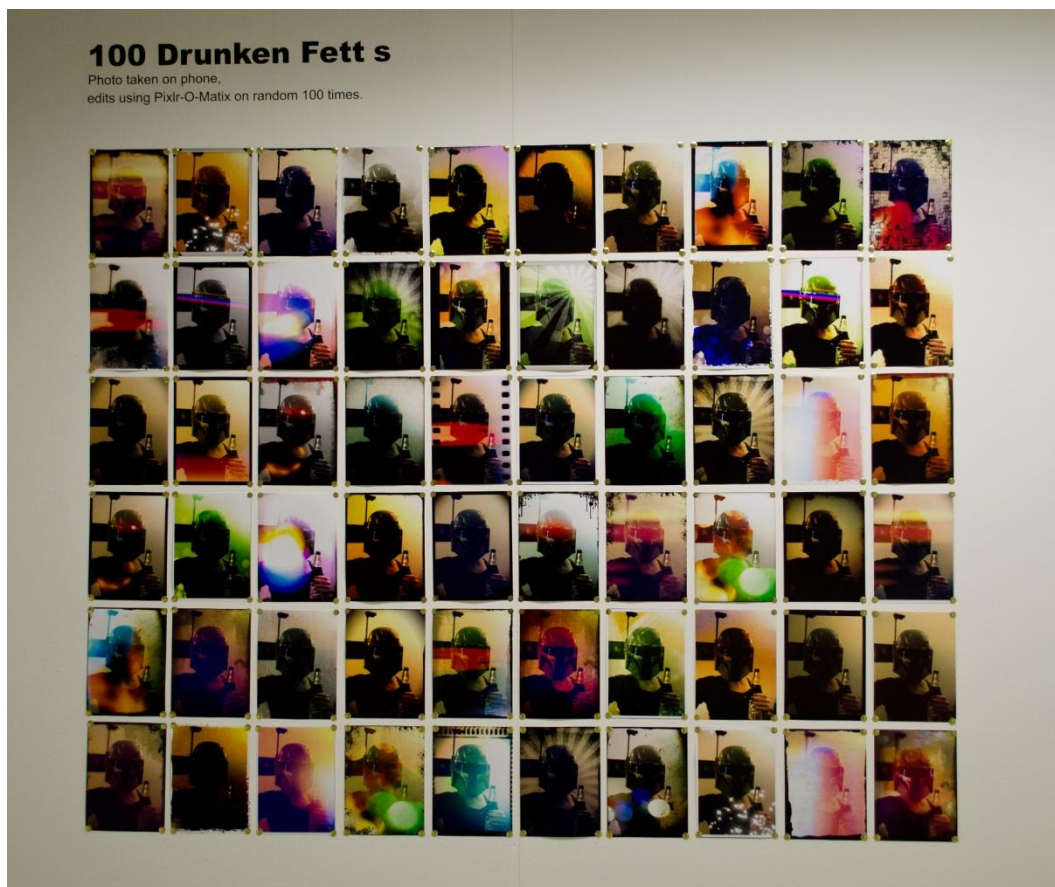


Figure 13. Liz Sterry, *100 Drunken Fetts*, 2013.

MS/PB

So the related content was to the... the drinking over the internet, but I suppose in a way what you have taken is a kind of formal development, you are actually looking at how you could play with the

individual look of each one and the whole question of the online editing software.

LS

Yeah, and I think the idea of selection as well...

MS/PB

Wasn't there some kind of larger black and white silhouette piece too?

LS

Yeah, the third set was the *Dancing Fett* piece, which is three large prints, which were taken on a 30 second exposure, so they were kind of blurry. It was a sort of continuous, I put on some punk music, wore a little black dress, a Boba Fett helmet and had a beer and danced about and I took these photos and they were on the 30 second exposure, so you got some movement and blur. So I was using sort of the stereotype of the little black dress, the Star Wars and things people could connect to and things that on the internet I know that people can grab onto... and I did those with my digital SLR camera, so not such an accessible piece of kit as I had been using, unlike the mobile phones and web cameras. Also the editing was much more under my control -, I used software that is not so accessible. I used Lightroom and Photoshop, and I had the images printed up quite big, bigger than you would be able to see something on the internet because you are limited by your screen size but they are very linked in a lot of ideas to the other two pieces, and the other two pieces are still very strongly linked to the internet behaviours and practices. The *Dancing Fetts* are, though, a more sort of gallery-ready piece...

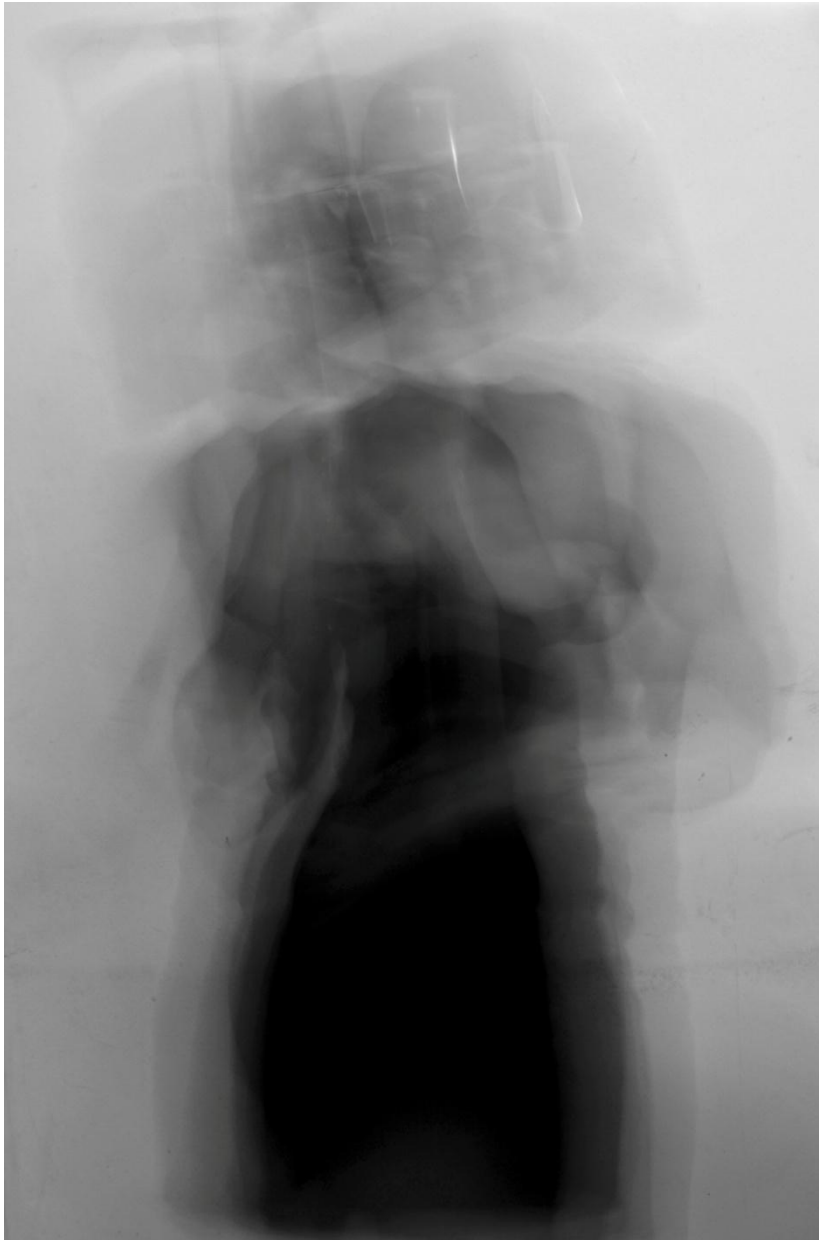


Figure 14. Liz Sterry, Dancing Fett, 2013.

MS/PB

Although they wouldn't exist without that other world, would they? You are still drawing on those kind of network sources. But there is something traditional about them, in that they are beautiful

photographs, there is no doubt about it, they are absolutely gorgeous –they remind me a little bit, in spirit, of Francesca Woodman.

Although a lot of people do perform on the internet, there is a very strong performative streak in your work, It's in all those pieces, you have got these three related pieces but they all have slightly different emphases, slightly different tendencies, some are more kind of located nearer to the kind of folk art traditions that have sprung up, some of them take them in other directions. Of course we wouldn't be sitting here talking to you if it was merely that you were someone who replicates internet memes in a banal and wooden kind of way. You clearly have an artistic conscience, mind and integrity, which takes those bits and transforms them. I suppose the decision you make is to what degree of transformation there is, and how much you seize control, for example, of the automatic editing process. How much you seize or cede control. It calls to mind the previous year's piece when you had the bulldog clips, there's an analogy there. That's a very long-winded way of asking you, were there things you learned from the show the year before that went into making the Star Wars related pieces, can you see any lines of continuity?

LS

I suppose the self-performative aspect of it, particularly, and again the repetition. I think probably the Star Wars pieces became more focused on the repetition, but repetition is definitely a major feature.

MS/PB

Did this "artification" of internet memes make you look at what is going on there in a different light

at all?

LS

I've never really shown any sort of interest in 'planking' where people lay down either on their side or face down and make their friends take photos (bbc.co.uk/news/magazine 2014) now I really sort of enjoy them, and I was thinking in ways they are similar to Ruscha's photos of gasoline stations and the way he used to take a thing, and repetitively do it (Mansoor, 2005). Planking has become this repetitively done activity, there is a pattern people follow when they do it, and I thought this was quite similar to the gas stations. Ruscha had been doing this drive backwards and forwards quite a lot in his life, and then one time he decided to stop and photograph every station on the way. He is following a simple set of rules, and that is how people are doing a lot of these behavioural memes, just following a simple set of rules, and redoing and redoing.

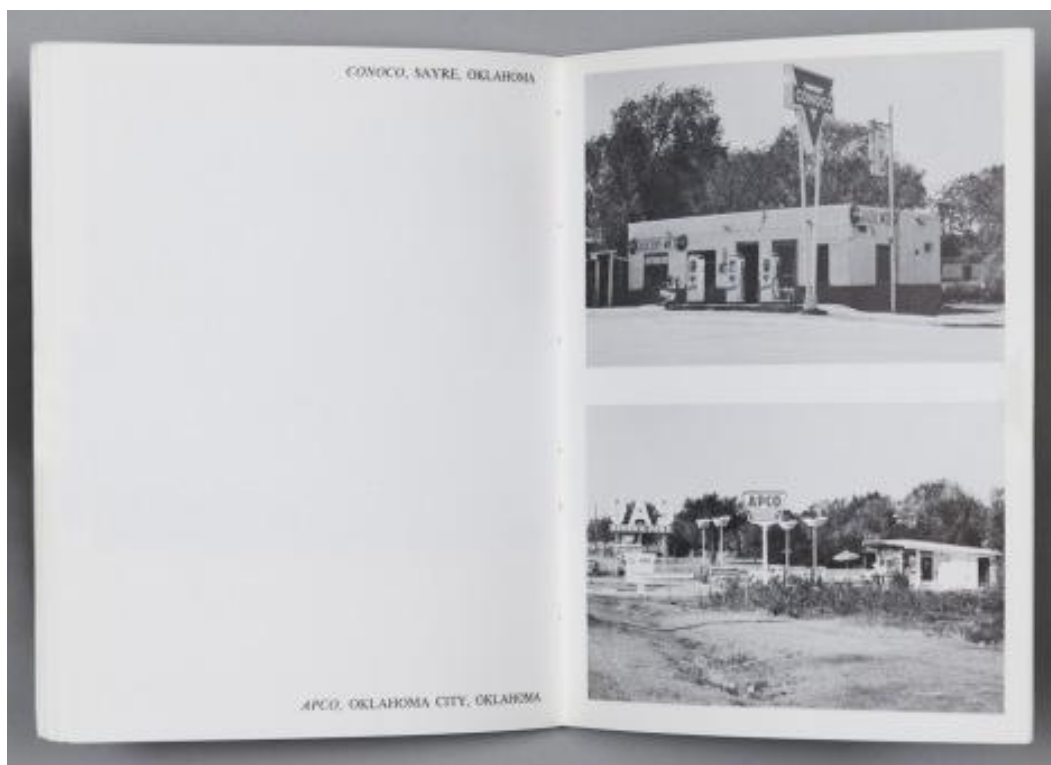


Figure 15. Edward Ruscha, Twentysix Gasoline Stations, 1963

Recent work

MS/PB

Okay, we have got a little bit more time to talk about your work. Is there anything you would like to say about work you have made since the MA show, because I know you had a show on the Isle of Wight. That was a collaborative project wasn't it?

LS

Yeah, it was just someone's photography Facebook fan page that I'd liked the photos, and she posted on her page to ask if anyone was interesting in collaborating, so I replied, and quite out of the blue she got back and we chatted on Facebook for a while, and it became an interesting thing as to how

this collaboration could happen, we didn't know each other and we were chatting only through Facebook, because we had started talking about ideas through Facebook, so we decided that was quite an interesting theme for this collaboration, so she sent me some photos that she had got printed of her work to play around with, and I painted all these strange patterns on, they were models, then I painted various bits over them in patterns and sewed onto them, you know, sometimes with Facebook you don't give a full sense of your identity, and here I was blotting out bits of their identity, you know, like the clothes they were wearing, or their hair, or bits of their face. That got shown in the Isle of Wight. I thought it was interesting that we were sending physical things backwards and forwards - I think because she sent me something physical, I wanted to make a physical mark on it, it's almost as if it isn't enough to talk digitally, you need a physical connection, although I love the internet and how we can communicate, there comes a point where you want a physical connection with someone, and I think that was part of that work.

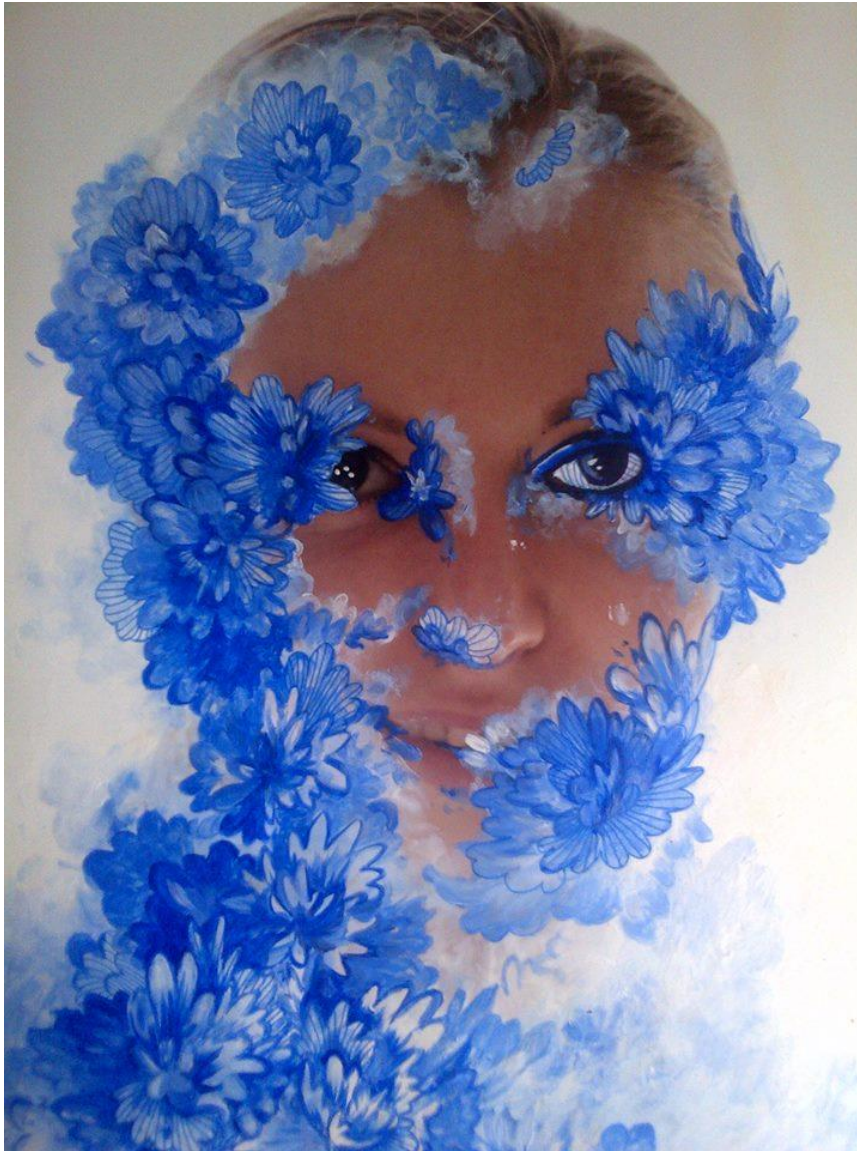


Figure 16. Liz Sterry and Holly Cade. Duet Exhibition Collaboration 2014

MS/PB

People you know, still want physical, some sort of...

LS

Yeah, you hear about couples that meet on the internet, and eventually they meet up years later.

(Daily Mail Reporter 2014). I think it's the nature of being human, you are going to want to physically meet someone.

MS/PB

The other thing is, and I'd like to know what you think about this, is that it strikes me that there has always been in your work quite a strong tension between the virtual and the actual, so we had the physical piece of the cassette tape, we have the digital video that rose out of wooden frames.

Drawing has always been a practice that for you seems to have floated around your work for example the beautiful sketches that you made around Kay's Blog I also own one of the pieces that you made around the Boba Fett work, with this obsessively detailed and repetitive mark-making often with ball-point, which puts me in mind a bit of Boetti. Now with the piece that you made for the show in the Isle of Wight, you have got the virtual but you have also got, and this is often the case in your work, really quite a basic kind of traditional set of practices of drawing and making too.

LS

I think it's how I make sense of things in life in general, I want to pick them up and poke them. I wanted to do that with the internet with Kay's Blog, I wanted to know what it meant for her to invite us into her physical space so I built her physical space and got in it. I think that's how I understand things and how I think. I like to make physical things, it's as if how I'm making sense of the internet is by making a physical answer to some of the questions.

MA/PB

Yes - in terms of your photography work it hasn't been by any means simply "conceptual". You developed specific skills in photography, you have used things like pinhole cameras, camera kits, you've done some development, actually, quite a lot of stuff that actually would have been at one

time would have been the meat and drink of an apprentice in the photography trade. I find it interesting that you are at home at one and the same time in both the world of high virtuality and that you are a very competent, maker and user very kind of time honoured, very physical techniques.

LS

Although we have all these answers to social things on the internet, I don't think it is ever going to replace face to face . People are always worried that people are going to replace everything with the internet, and we are going to do all our socialising on the internet - you often see people having a strop about it on Facebook and say "I'm leaving Facebook because I never see or speak to my friends properly anymore".

I really don't think we have to worry about that, you know, like the Matrix film, we're all going to be plugged into machines? I think people get really hung up on that, but it's really not an issue, because we are still very physical.

MS/PB

Yeah, and it's interesting the Isle of Wight was an example of your social circle being expanded by the internet...

OK just to kind of round up your account of your work, you're now doing this Chelmsford Council sponsored community outreach project. Can you just say something about that and about how any of the work you have done so far has fed into that, whether this has taken you into any directions, and about the work that you have actually made personally for it?

LS

For the work that I am in the process of making for it I've been using an Instagram account (Instagram. 2014) that I have set up just for this project, and when we have arranged with various community groups to go on walks around Great Baddow and photograph areas I've been using Instagram, but then getting some of the images printed up and I am stitching on these images following the lines of the buildings, so on the back you are going to end up with an altered, very abstract kind of version of what is on one side. I think it was to do with the idea of how you don't get a real feel for something by Instagram. I often use Instagram, Google Maps or Google Streetview if I'm going somewhere to check it out, but it doesn't answer what it is likely to be there physically, so by making an even more abstract version, I'm kind of playing with those ideas. The other pieces I am making, they are going to be little acrylic plastic boxes, with the just the lines of the maps that I have looked on Google on top, and a photo of that area from Instagram on the inside, so that you will be able to look through, so it's a physical Google Map really. I find the GPS feature on Instagram quite interesting.



Figure 17. Liz Sterry, Great Baddow Sense of Place Exhibition 2014



Figure 18. Liz Sterry, Great Baddow Sense of Place Exhibition 2014

MS/PB

Was there anything that you felt that was a bit different about running a kind of collaborative project that is very much like a real world kind of project first, rather than the online ones that you sought to do in the past, or did it just reinforce there is just less difference than people think between those two realms?

LS

I have found the actual online one easier! I think there was a lot of trust there, and although Holly Cage who I collaborated with was a complete stranger, there was a lot of “we have to trust each other”, we didn’t really have a choice if we were going to collaborate, you have to hand a bit over to her and then you don’t hear anything for a while, and then it comes back to me, and you know, you try and update people, you know, I was trying to update her by taking photos of progress and sending it to her, but there is I think an awful lot of trust. Whereas the Great Baddow project, me and Tracy who I’m working with on it, have known each other for three or four years now, and worked together on other things, and it’s different because we can just pop round and see each

other and discuss things face to face, so you don't have to tell each other what you are going to do, and to a degree you do, but you can always go and physically check in and say "How's that going?" and help on a certain task if needs be, but me and Holly couldn't really do that.

MS/PB *In terms of work that you want to make in the future, do you have any sort of notion of where your work might go? We don't want to ask you to spill any secrets but what have you got lurking in your mind, and how does it relate to the work that you have already made?*

LS

Well Holly and I were got given a solo exhibition, so once I've finished with Great Baddow, that will be my next thing to work on. Because the theme that the gallery liked in both our work was the theme of journeys and the physical thing of making a journey, we are both working on the this, and we are going to do our individual things and then bring it all together with some collaborations in the same sort of style we did before, and with 'journey' I'm going to work on some slides, old photo slides my sister sent me from Tasmania, she found in a second hand shop and she posted over to me, so they have already made a journey, and I wonder about the people in them, because they are from the 1950s and there are some quite interesting photographs there. I'm not sure what to do with them yet, I may get my sister to take photos in Tasmania and play with the photos and the slides. I was also looking at them and comparing them, seeing if I could find them on Google Earth, so some of the places in the photos I have been able to find on google street view. I've been looking at artists who are making very physical journeys in their work for instance artists like, Richard Long (Long, 2009), Ed Ruscha's Twentysix Gasoline Station (Whitney Museum of American Art, Roxwell, Ruscha, 2006) and Milena Bonilla's beautiful Transitory Map project. (Transitory Map`2014). They have all used photography to document these movements. I think that's interesting.



Figure 19. Liz Sterry, Slide from Tasmania held in front of Facebook profile, 2014.

MS/PB

Finally I just want to ask about... not the big projects, but the kind of things you do in-between, so, for example you recently made some very beautiful little sketches from Google Street View. You had also a very intense kind of relationship with Flickr for a while, which gave rise to lots and lots of photographs, made in many different ways, and you know, there is a really interesting kind of creative force that you have where you try out lots of things. It was also very interesting the way that you included both your work as a model, so there were shots of you modelling, so if you like, it recorded your performances, and side by side there were photographs that for example that you developed yourself, and then there were these kind of interesting in-between things, where you were dressing up, and self-imaging. Can you say something about that sort of spread of practice and the

use of a very web 2.0 thing like Flickr to disseminate or at least to test out work in progress or ideas towards work. What are the reasons for that particular way of working?

LS

I think Flickr is like, it feels like an online sketchbook to me, and you can just go through everything and see where you were three weeks ago, and where you are today, and if you want to go “oh, what was I doing last year?”, you can go check it out so, I used it, although I haven’t used it for a while now, just as a way to record ideas, so you quickly make an idea and then it can go on Flickr and you can come back to it and develop it later if you want, or it can just sit on the internet as a thing. I also like that its public, so it's like leaving your sketch book open on a desk and people can look at it.

MS/PB

Do you feel differently about this “side-project” work do you conceptually separate it from the bigger pieces ?

LS

No, I don’t separate them. I don’t think a part of my work is ever finished, like Kay’s Blog. Although it’s a finished piece, it’s not a finished thought process, so it doesn’t feel like a final piece, it just feels like a research piece.



Figure 20. Liz Sterry, *People of Google Streetview*, pen and paper, 2014

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Images:

Figure 1. *Your Music Sucks Anyway, Writtle College 2009*

Figure 2. *Tara Donovan, Untitled, 2003, Styrofoam Cups, Hot Glue, 6'(H) x 20'(W) x 19' 2"(D), Ace Gallery New York*

Figure 3. *Still from Borders, 2010*

Figure 4. *Kay's Blog at Furtherfield Gallery Finsbury Park London, 2012*

Figure 5. *Sophie Calle, The Hotel, Room 44, 1981*

Figure 6. Kay's Blog September 2014 - The O2 Centre, London. Part of Digital Zoo UK TOUR 2014 with Furtherfield Gallery

Figure 7. *Tumblr.com screen grab 19/09/2014*

Figure 8. Page from sketch book on Kay's Blog 2011

Figure 9 *Nan Goldin, Nan and Brian in Bed, New York City 1983*

Figure 10. Self Portrait Installation, Writtle College 2012.

Figure 11. Drinking Alone With The Internet, Drinking Rum as Boba Fett, 2013

Figure 12. Drinking Alone With The Internet, Drinking Rum as an Ewok, 2013

Figure 13. 100 Drunken Fetts, 2013

Figure 14. Dancing Fett, 2013

Figure 15. Edward Ruscha, Twentysix Gasoline Stations, 1963

Figure 16. Liz Sterry and Holly Cade. Duet Exhibition Collaboration, 2014.

Figure 17. Great Baddow Sense of Place Exhibition 2014

Figure 18. Liz Sterry, Great Baddow Sense of Place Exhibition 2014

Figure 19. Liz Sterry, Slide from Tasmania held in front of Facebook profile. 2014

Figure 20. Liz Sterry, People of Google streetview, Pen and Paper 2014

